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ABSTRACT

During October 1972, two events of national scope focused the attention of educators, parents, and politicians alike upon the subject of children and television. Three days of panels climaxed 32 months of FCC (Federal Communications Commission) inquiry into children's television. The Third National Symposium on Children and Television, sponsored by Action for Children's Television (ACT), was held at Yale University. First-hand reports of both these gatherings are presented in this report. (JY)

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Special report November 1972

Children and Television

Last month, two separate events of national scope focused the attention of educators, parents and politicians alike upon the subject of Children and Television.

From a single letter from an irate parent to numerous well-researched volumes submitted to the U.S. Surgeon General, hundreds of thousands of words have been written and spoken on the subject of children's programming.

Much of the most relevant and timely material was collected and presented at the two gatherings last month: the FCC panels in Washington, D.C., and the Third National Symposium of Action for Children's Television at Yale University.

The three days of panels October 4-6 climaxed 32 months of inquiry into children's TV programming by the Federal Communications Commission. The panels were designed to provide an airing of all significant issues raised thus far, including commercials aimed at children, the proper role of government, and "age specific" programming.

Ms. Sally Williams, executive director of the San Francisco-based Committee on Children's Television, was an eyewitness to and participant in these panels, and serves as the ERIC at Stanford reporter for this event.

The ACT Symposium on Children and Television held October 15-17 brought together experts from a wide range of professions to examine the effects and importance of television in the lives of young children. Child development professors and advertising executives, parents and teachers, students and businessmen, all joined in focusing their attention on two major aspects of American children's television: the criteria for producing programs, and the need for adequate financing.

Ms. Williams and Judith Yarborough, Clearinghouse assistant director, served as ERIC at Stanford reporters for this event. Both attended and took part in the proceedings.

FCC Hearings

by Sally Williams

INTRODUCTION

The FCC panels on children's television tried to talk about television's role in the life of a pre-schooler (2-5) and in the life of a middle-age child (6-12). Held early last month in Washington, D.C., the panels were designed to explore new ways for television to enhance the quality of play (entertainment) for children, and to define alternative methods for financing children's television.

The panels achieved some of these goals–perhaps too few because the panelists were predominantly broadcasters and advertisers. Only four panelists of 44 represented minority groups – 2 Black and 2 Spanish surname – and one of these was a broadcaster. Only six represented public interest groups, and only 8 were women.

HIGHLIGHTS

Panel I: Content Diversification

Panel 1's instructions were to discuss the needs of children and how the content of children's programs can relate to these needs. They were to discuss the variety of programming approaches that could be utilized in children's

(cont. on page 3)

ACT Symposium

by Judith Yarborough
and Sally Williams

In the Monday afternoon session, producers of current children's television programs discussed their criteria and philosophy and showed excerpts from their programs. The panel moderator, John Culkin, director of the Center for Understanding Media, paraphrased Alexander Pope by saying that "the proper study of television is television itself" and asked the panel members to give 15 minutes' worth of their view of television.

David Connell, vice president for production at Children's Television Workshop, spoke about the need for a strong and effective research program. He said that CTW spends $614,000 annually for research to help them set general educational goals, establish curriculum goals, define the nature of the audience, and test program segments for

". . . there needs to be a good working relationship between the researcher and program producer."

effectiveness. He described the use of "distractor tests" which pit the instructional program segment against slides of appealing subjects to see which presentation the child watches. Along with the research itself, he noted, there needs to be a good working relationship between the researcher and program producer so that the results of the research are actually incorporated into the programs.

Gail Frank, producer of a half-hour Boston-based show called "Jabberwocky," spoke of her desire for

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(cont. from page 1)

television programs that deal with the "gray areas of education," and offer an honest approach to the problems of everyday life for children—deciding ethical questions, relating to other children and adults, and promoting good communication with authority figures like policemen, teachers, and parents.

Views on the goals of children's TV programs are exchanged at the ACT Symposium by panel members (from the left): Christopher Sarson, executive producer of "ZOOM"; David Connell, vice president for production of Children's Television Workshop; Fred Rogers, host of "Mister Rogers' Neighborhood"; Morrie Turner, creator of "Kid Power"; and John Culkin, director, Center for Understanding Media.

Fred Rogers, producer and host of the well-known "Mister Rogers' Neighborhood," described his goal as "facilitating communication within the family." Children are often exposed to experiences far beyond what their egos can deal with effectively, he contended. And he called upon television to provide images of trustworthy adults who can modulate these experiences.

"Don't get caught up in the notion that complexity implies quality," he cautioned. "Simplicity is the key. But programming should not be childish as it helps children discover their own boundaries of self," he concluded.

ACT would like to see more "age specific" programs on TV—programs aimed at limited age groups rather than at the general 2 - 12-year-old child audience.

"ZOOM," a weekly half-hour show on public television, is one example of this type of programming. Aimed at 8 – 12-year-olds, it uses materials submitted and performed by children, according to Christopher Sarson, executive producer. He tries to present representative children—not professional actors—as models and moderators for the audience, Mr. Sarson explained. Generating 2,000 letters a day from children, "ZOOM" is the second most popular show produced by PBS, he noted. (The first is "Masterpiece Theater.")

Financing children's television was [illegible]nic for the Tuesday morning session. "Who pays w[illegible] much for what?" was the central question of [illegible]cording to Panel Moderator Robert Lewis Shaynon, professor of communications at the Annenberg School of Communications, University of Pennsylvania.

"Children should be removed from the marketplace altogether."

Peggy Charren, president of ACT, spoke for the public. It is they, she said, who ultimately pay for children's television either through taxes for such shows as "Sesame Street" and "The Electric Company," or through higher costs for products advertised on TV.

Children should be removed from the marketplace altogether as soon as possible, she said, and soundly condemned the practice of selling directly to youth.

Ways of removing advertisements from children's programs were then explored by Dr. William Melody, professor of communications and economics at Annenburg School of Communications, who prepared a study on that subject for ACT.

"The networks are in the business of 'selling eyeballs' to advertisers."

Industry must maximize profit, he explained, while attempting to perform public service in such a way that it doesn't detract from that profit. The networks are in the business of "selling eyeballs" to advertisers, and have found children a profitable market.

Dr. Melody suggested that cable television operators are in a position at this time to make commitments of quality programming because their potential revenue does not stem entirely from advertisers, but from subscribers as well. They are now in the stage of selling cable systems rather than audiences and therefore have a greater flexibility in programming.

Attempting to work with cable operators, he said, does not mean giving up on the commercial networks. He recommended a several-year program of phasing out commercials and replacing them with institutional sponsors or revenues from other sources. The FCC is in a position to require such a phase-out, he contended.

Kenneth Mason of Quaker Oats Company offered a proposal to upgrade the quality of Saturday morning shows without radically changing the ways shows are financed. In business, the rule is to maximize the returns you get from the assets you employ. In spite of the nearly $100 million spent a year by advertisers on children's television, he noted, very little in the way of quality programing has resulted. He then proposed a "children's hour" on Saturday morning at 11 o'clock to be simulcast on all three major networks. This would triple the money available for the show and would be in the already-established tradition of "pooling" which the networks use for major news events. Commercials would be rotated through the shows on each station, assuring that no station would lose revenue from the venture. The one unacceptable alternative, he emphasized, is that television programs for children go on for the next ten years as they have for the last ten.

"... (like) shooting fish in a barrel."

Joan Ganz Cooney, president of the Children's Television Workshop, returned to the topic of advertising to children. She condemned the practice vigorously, calling it "shooting fish in a barrel . . . a direct appeal to consumers who are illiterate, unemployed, unemployable, and dependent for their welfare on others." The public now pays both the direct and indirect costs of the present system and even if it meant less commercial television programs for children, removing advertisements to children would be preferable to the "bad teeth and warped value systems" that result from the present system.

In rebuttal, Michael Eisner, who is in charge of program development for children at ABC-TV, stated that financial stability is necessary to produce creative programs: The profits from existing shows are the capital for developing new kinds of shows. He pointed out that unions and talent packaging agencies do not lower their charges for children's television shows. ABC has begun to cluster commercials within children's programs, he said, resulting in fewer program interruptions.

No other means of financing children's programming

were discovered in a final question and answer period. Participants agreed, however, that the quality of television shows for children and the question of the morality of selling to children are separate issues. Although they are linked in some ways, they require different approaches for solution.

William Kessen, professor of psychology at the School of Medicine, stated that one of the reasons children's shows were an "animated wasteland" is that "the problems posed to children are the same as those posed to adults. Not only are the problems inappropriate, but only a limited number of solutions as offered, and often the solution comes about through the stupidity of the authority figure." "All in the Family" and its Saturday morning animated version, "The Barkleys" were cited as an example.

The importance of heroes, especially for Black children, was the topic of Wendy Glasgow, a Black assistant professor in social work. She reminded the virtually all-white symposium audience that it is important for television to differentiate between characterizations and stereotypes. Commenting on ABC's new cartoon, "Kid Power," she noted unconscious slurs should be avoided–such as a phrase used in the cartoon, "That's mighty white of you."

". . . mighty white of you."

Melvin Lewis, professor of clinical pediatrics and psychiatry, continued the discussion of role models as he discussed the problems that television presents to children in the area of sex role types. He felt there is no range in the portrayal of sex roles on television, and particularly in the area of sex assignments in terms of career roles. When a member of the audience commented that today's television is raising subjects forbidden a few years ago, Dr. Lewis responded, "To bring up a subject to talk about it, but not deal with it, is worse than ignoring it."

"Directions for Change" panel moderator, Albert Kramer of the Citizens' Communication Center in Washington, D.C., has been providing legal advice to citizens in the area of broadcasting since 1969. Mr. Kramer, noting that the airwaves are public, pointed out that broadcasters had assumed "ownership in an intellectual sense" which he felt was worse than "ownership through bribery." Stating that all groups will have to put the FCC in the hotseat in order to implement regulatory process, Mr. Kramer introduced Joan Zeldes Bernstein, a lawyer with the Federal Trade Commission, to discuss the role of a federal agency in the development of rules that protect the consumer.

Although Ms. Bernstein spoke as an individual and not for the FTC, she expressed the FTC's commitment to truth and responsibility in advertising and particularly in advertising directed to vulnerable children. While policing for mis-representations is one of the FTC's functions, Ms. Bernstein felt that of the remedies available to the consumer, "disclosure" was more important than corrective advertising. Examples of disclosure cited by Ms. Bernstein were the print disclosures on cigarette packages and permanent labeling giving directions for the correct care of the clothing. Ms. Bernstein felt that the legal principles behind disclosures were applicable to TV advertisements directed toward children.

Letty Cottin Pogrebin, consultant on feminist issues, did not think that sexism in television for children was limited to advertising. A general view of women portrayed on television, reported Ms. Pogrebin, "stereotypes them as being obsessed by trivia, giggling, inept, and always testing a product." In situations on television in which a man would be described as assertive, a woman would be described as aggressive. She pointed out "there are no *married* working women on television situation programs," and capped off her report with statistics from a study of television programming viewed by children in the Washington, D.C. area: "Within all of the programs studied, there were only four female leads and two of them were witches!"

". . . only four female leads and two of them were witches!"

Sally Williams, executive director of the Committee on Children's Television, San Francisco, described the climate in which experimentation and freedom could take place. She described how a small group could organize the local community into a potent group which could command local station attention and engage management in serious negotiation about improving the quality and quantity of children's programming. The CCT guide, "Climate for Change," outlining the organization of a community media group and effective legal actions is listed as a resource in this newsletter.

The concluding panelist in the Symposium gave everyone something to remember when he answered the central question posed by the symposium, "Who is Talking to Our Children?" William Wright, director of Black Efforts for Soul in Television revealed that a pilot study done by BEST for ACT analyzing the treatment of Black and other minority groups on network children's television found that non-American and non-white cultures were referred to negatively almost every time they were mentioned, and that Black and other minority characters made up only a small percentage of characters–7% Black and 2% other minorities. All figures of authority or sources of information were white and all four references to American Indians were derogatory. Mr. Wright's report stated, "It is horrifying to realize how much stereotyped thinking and bigoted information is being absorbed by young minds while watching these programs."

Copies of the BEST study and a full transcript of the symposium are available from ACT, 46 Austin St., Newtonville, Massachusetts 02160.

(cont. on page 5)

FCC Hearings (cont.)

shows. They were to examine the practical problems and to discuss the establishment of programming priorities.

"Television introduces children to the world." Frederick Greene of the U.S. Office of Child Development said that the relationship of children to television means "everything children see is information and affects their development. Since pro-socialization learning is as important as cognitive learning, the chronological and cultural level of children must be recognized when developing entertaining–informative programming as they are recognized in the development of school curriculums." Dr. Greene emphasized that an important first step in achieving improved programming for children is to make a profession out of the development of children's programming.

FCC Commissioner Nicholas Johnson noted the importance of the involvement of advertisers in working for better program fare for children: over 25% of children's TV

"If a teacher was paid . . . for how much popcorn she could sell between classes, her teaching style would be affected too."

commercials. He suggested that, until change occurred, responsible advertisers would have a difficult time finding quality programming to sponsor. "After all," commented Commissioner Johnson, "if a teacher was paid on the basis of how much popcorn she could sell between classes, her teaching style would be affected too!"

Panel II: Age Specific Programming

One of the few conclusions reached by any of the panels during the three-day session was that pre-school children (2-5) and middle-age children (6-12) have different needs that should be met by television programs designed especially for each age group.

Neil Morse, co-chairman of the Committee on Children's Television (San Francisco) established the climate for the panels by outlining the developmental needs of children. These needs vary and change as children grow: (1) Pre-school children require a strong sense of security and cannot distinguish between fantasy and reality. (2) Older children must develop self esteem, competency, and a sense of how to channel aggression constructively as well as how to deal with their environment.

Importantly, older children adopt many television figures as role models. Mr. Morse pointed out that broadcasters must be aware of needs and interests of children before they can program to serve these needs and interests. Because broadcasters have ignored the FCC requirement to ascertain the needs and interests of children, programming for children has been a dismal failure. Mr. Morse, basing his remarks on the FCC's "Primer on Ascertainment of Community Problems," stated that the best hope for improved children's programming lies in the FCC's enforcement of ascertainment requirements.

The responsibility for television service lies with the individual licensee. A licensed station's programming concepts should flow directly from the station's contacts with educators, child specialists, parents, and others concerned with children. Utilizing this information, the children's schedule assembled by the station would include programming from networks and syndicators that the station needs based on its ascertainment studies. As well, some local programming would be designed to meet unique local needs of children. (Native Americans in the Southwest do have needs that differ from the Asian children of San Francisco or the French-speaking communities in the Northeast.)

Panel III: Responsive Scheduling

Chairman Dean Burch led off the questioning by asking Mrs. Evelyn Sarson, executive director of ACT, "If we took away the profit motive, would more children watch television?"

Interpreting this question to mean would there be better programming with more viewers, Mrs. Sarson responded, "We must provide incentives to get good children's programming." Turning to the other panelists, Chairman Burch asked: "If the FCC gave incentives like a five year license, how could we guarantee that broadcasters would fill the time with quality programming?" Except to note that the tax dollar of Americans has been expended through public broadcasting to demonstrate the diversity of the media, this question received no comment other than some happy smiles on the faces of broadcasters.

Since the major problem facing this panel concerned the sparsity of children's programs on weekday afternoons, a good deal of discussion time was given to UHF and independent stations' service to children in that time period.

Commissioner Robert Lee asked Richard Block of Kaiser Broadcasting about the reception of UHF in the inner-city. It wasn't clear that Mr. Block's response of "no paucity" meant that the inner-city could receive UHF signals or that the inner-city liked to watch UHF. However, Mr. McKinney-Smith of WDRX-TV, Paducah, had no trouble responding to the question. He said: "UHF is a bastard child. I'm constantly reminded of it by advertisers, viewers, and when trying to get a network affiliation."

Evelyn Sarson pointed out that independents were showing old cartoons and old network situation shows on weekdays to children because they were inexpensive. Mr. Block preferred to think that "the evolution of children's programming to the independents was caused by the vacuum the networks created."

A discussion by the panelists of the new NAB Code limiting the amount of weekend advertising to children caused Mr. Block to comment, "Any regulation regarding the quality and quantity of children's programming should be limited to the weekends because regulation would hurt the independents who rely on a child audience on weekday afternoons." Mr. Block felt that he already had a responsible weekday afternoon schedule for children and cited "The Little Rascals" as an example. Although this program is regarded as demeaning by many Blacks, Mr. Block felt that this was "a beneficial program that would aid integration."

"... television is replacing an environment."

Dr. John Condry, Department of Human Development, New York State College, pointed out that television is replacing an environment. "Parents used to read to kids and pass along traditions. Can't television pick up these traditions in all their diversity and pass these along instead of the 'Flintstones'?"

Panel IV: Children's Television and Advertising Practices

This panel was held in two sections. The first section dealt with the question of the appropriate amount of advertising and clustering of commercials, and the second section dealt with the appropriateness of children's show hosts selling products to children.

Ray Hubbard of WTOP-TV, Washington, D.C., said he found clustered commercials profitable and responsible.

But there was no opportunity for panelists to explore the issues surrounding advertising in any depth.

The second question of "No Host Selling" is a moot point for 40% of the stations in the country. The National Association of Broadcasters Code Authority has ruled that hosts will not sell to children after January 1, 1973.

Robert Keeshan (Captain Kangaroo) stated, "My own personal prejudice would cause me to agree that there is a conflict in the host doing both jobs."

On the other hand, Happy Rain, a children's show hostess from Charleston, South Carolina, and Larry Harmon ("Bozo") believed that hosts had to sell, not only to stay alive, but, as Sherman Headley of WCCO-TV, Minneapolis, put it, "Who else would do the commercials? ... "Ads are good because they condition kids for the real world."

"I just tell her (daughter) I know Momma said it on TV, but you can't have it!" (Children's TV program hostess).

While Happy Rain wanted children to believe her, she retorted when asked how she handled matters with her own

child, "I just tell her I know Momma said it on TV, but you can't have it!" Wanda Lesser, a Charleston mother informed the commissioners that 2,000 families have joined the Charleston's Citizens for Better Broadcasting to protest Happy Rain's mistreatment of children.

Katherine Lustman of the Yale Study Center commented, "There are many cultures without commercial television where children still play imaginatively with creative toys. This push button, battery-operated world has reduced the quality of play in our children."

Panel V: Alternative Methods of Financing

Joan Ganz Cooney of the Children's Television Workshop set the stage by stating "commercial television's children's programming is a disgrace." She expressed alarm that "we're asking two businesses–broadcasters and advertisers–to make decisions about what's good for children." Personally, she felt "there would be no grave loss in the world for children if Saturday morning were wiped out." However, she went on, "Saturday morning is there so we must talk about how to improve it." Ms. Cooney suggested, "We need to concentrate on making decisions based on children and not on the industries' or the advertisers' needs."

Ms. Cooney was displeased that the response she most frequently heard from broadcasters was that there is no evidence that Saturday morning fare is harmful to children. Ms. Cooney said that this response avoided the question and she insisted that "children must be removed from the profit center of broadcasting."

Al Fields of Health Tex, Inc. echoed the views of a previous panelist when he reported that he was having difficulty finding quality children's shows to sponsor. Mr. Fields reported that the sales of Health Tex reflected the success of supporting quality programming through institutional advertising. "If," he said, "the networks would pre-advertise the fact that a company was supporting or underwriting a children's program, more companies would become interested in institutional advertising."

Fred Pierce from ABC pointed out that "institutional advertising is saved for prime time."

Commissioner Hooks seemed puzzled by Mr. Pierce's flat answer and asked, "Why can't you underwrite during children's hours and announce during adult time that a program was going to be aired for children sponsored by a certain company?"

Mr. Pierce, reflecting for a moment, answered, "An advertiser has the option to use his billboard time as he wants" . . . (pause) "We don't promote our children's shows, but it might be worth considering."

Commissioner Rex Lee raised the question, "Why can't we get quality programming distributed?"

Edmund Smarden of Carson-Roberts, Inc., the ad agency for Mattel and developers of a bartered children's program "The New Zoo Review" said he felt that children's programs could be produced and distributed if the government would make small business loans available to broadcasters for interim financing. He also felt that it would be beneficial if there was a special reduced pay rate for labor participating in children's shows.

Panel VI: Self-Regulation

Herminio Traviesis of NBC felt his network had an effective in-house procedure for judging children's programming. Although NBC is a Code supporter, Mr. Traviesis questioned any kind of regulation because "taste is a subjective thing."

Dr. Ithiel de Sola Pool of MIT commented that the current state of children's programming is evidence that some kind of regulation is needed. Although he preferred that the FCC exercise its obligations, he asked, "How do you get pro-social programming through self-regulation?"

Stockton Helffrich, as spokesman for self-regulation, said that he sees the Code Authority of the National Association of Broadcasters as being only able to "go in the direction its constituents want it to go." Presently, the only persons participating in code development are the NAB constituents who can only be broadcasters. When asked why the participation was limited, Mr. Helffrich said that he felt that non-code members with views that oppose the Code could be invited to address the Code "if it was reasonable and feasible for the Code to invite them to speak."

Steve Bluestone, a former editor at the Code Authority, said that the NAB does know the answers to many questions raised by the panels and that the Code has withheld the information. Mr. Bluestone was particularly unhappy that the Code had not published the results of some of its own studies that affected children's television.

Bluestone's sense that "the Code Authority doesn't feel the pulse of the country and interpret it into code," was shared by Donald McGannon, president of Westinghouse Broadcasting, Inc.

Mr. McGannon stated, "Self-regulation does not work, but it could." He said the Code's "commercial standards were ludicrous and needed rewriting." Further, he suggested "public members need to be added to the Code Board."

Commissioner Lee was quick to note that "the only thing wrong with the Code is that there are no sanctions."

Ruth Handler of Mattel Toys had a remedy for NAB's problems. She proposed that the NAB Code be replaced by "CARA." She offered the services of the Mattel staff to write new standards for commercial messages for children. She announced that "all participating stations would receive the CARA sign of approval for their toy ads," and added that "stations violating the CARA code be turned over to the FCC." Mrs. Handler felt that she was qualified to write a new code because she knew a lot about self-regulation and that she "loved my children and grandchildren and wanted them to grow up to be good corporate citizens."

ACT Symposium (cont.)

"For most children, television is the society at large," according to Richard H. Granger, associate professor of clinical pediatrics at Yale University. His remark set in motion a discussion of how television affects a child's development, with Yale University's Child Study Center staff providing the information.

"The messages of television are accepted by a child," continued Dr. Granger, "because of the parents who allow the child to watch television, and because of the child's acceptance of the authority of the (televised) adult giving the message."

Katherine R. Lustman, co-director of the Nursery School at the Yale Child Study Center, stated, "The quality of play of the children in our nursery school had worsened with the advent of heavy television viewing." Although she talked about the child's confusion of fantasy and reality, she said she was most concerned about the types of toys that children need to work through adjustments, fears, and

"crash cars," "knock-em, sock-em robots" . . .

problems. Ms. Lustman felt that the toys used by today's children—"crash cars," "knock-em, sock-em robots," talking telephones, etc.—all heavily advertised on television—"have fears that are built in and reinforce the child's problems rather than letting him use the toy for inter-play."

John E. Schowalter, director of training, Child Psychiatry Unit, felt that a child's ability to understand life was made more difficult by the confused messages on television regarding violence and death. He cited the laugh tracks which are supposed to make violence funny and a segment of the "Roadrunner" cartoon in which Roadrunner allegedly dies nine times in six minutes but is miraculously reborn. Dr. Schowalter said that death and violence should be shown on television, but he pleaded that their incidence be limited and that "producers take into account the developmental needs of children."

". . . died nine times in six minutes but is miraculously reborn."

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Newtonville, Massachusetts 02160
617–244-5941

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Concerned Groups

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Federal Trade Commission
Bureau of Consumer Protection
Washington, D.C. 20580

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Black Efforts for Soul in Television
1015 North Carolina Ave. S.E.
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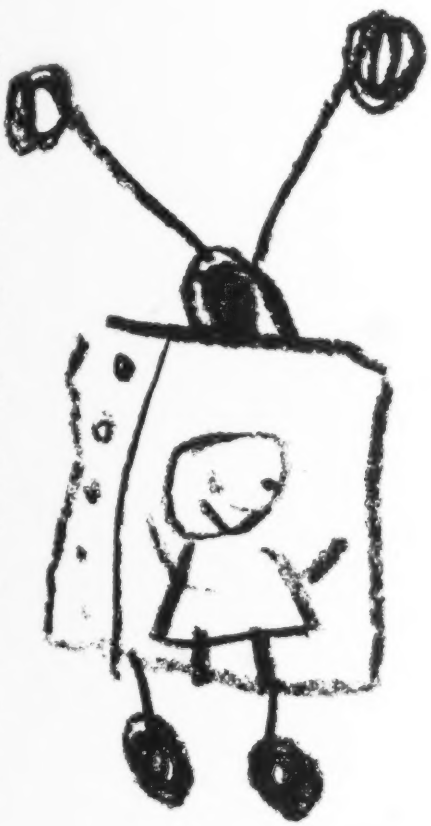

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